

The Pyramid of Privilege
Unitarian Universalist Church of Buffalo
Sunday, January 15, 2012
Rev. Margret A. O'Neill

Readings prior to the sermon:

An excerpt from "Letter from a Birmingham Jail" written by Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 16, 1963, to the clergymen of the City of Birmingham, Alabama:

. . . I must confess that over the past few years I have been gravely disappointed with the white moderate. I have almost reached the regrettable conclusion that the Negro's great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the . . . Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to "order" than to justice; who prefers a negative peace which is the absence of tension to a positive peace which is the presence of justice; who constantly says: "I agree with you in the goal you seek, but I cannot agree with your methods of direct action;" who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man's freedom; who lives by a mythical concept of time and who constantly advises the Negro to wait for a "more convenient season." Shallow understanding from people of good will is more frustrating than absolute misunderstanding from people of ill will. Lukewarm acceptance is much more bewildering than outright rejection. . . . I must honestly reiterate that I have been disappointed with the church. . . .

When I was suddenly catapulted into the leadership of the bus protest in Montgomery, Alabama, a few years ago, I felt we would be supported by the white church. I felt that the white ministers, priests and rabbis of the South would be among our strongest allies. Instead, some have been outright opponents, refusing to understand the freedom movement and misrepresenting its leaders; all too many others have been more cautious than courageous and have remained silent behind the anesthetizing security of stained glass windows. . . .

In the midst of blatant injustices inflicted upon the Negro, I have watched white churchmen stand on the sideline and mouth pious irrelevancies and sanctimonious trivialities. In the midst of a mighty struggle to rid our nation of racial and economic injustice, I have heard many ministers say: "Those are social issues, with which the gospel has no real concern." And I have watched many churches commit themselves to a completely other worldly religion which makes a strange, un-Biblical distinction between body and soul, between the sacred and the secular.

I have traveled the length and breadth of Alabama, Mississippi and all the other southern states. On sweltering summer days and crisp autumn mornings I have looked at the South's beautiful churches with their lofty spires pointing heavenward. I have beheld the impressive outlines of her massive religious education buildings. . . . Over and over I have found myself asking: "What kind of people worship here? Who is their God? . . . Where were their voices of support when bruised and weary Negro men and women decided to rise from the dark dungeons of complacency to the bright hills of creative protest?"

There was a time when the church was very powerful--in the time when the early Christians rejoiced at being deemed worthy to suffer for what they believed. . . . Things are different now. So often the contemporary church is a weak, ineffectual voice with an uncertain sound. So often it is an archdefender of the status quo. Far from being disturbed by the presence of the church, the power structure of the average community is consoled by the church's silent--and often even vocal--sanction of things as they are. . . . Is organized religion too inextricably bound to the status quo to save our nation and the world?

An excerpt from the essay *Useable Truth* by Rev. Richard Gilbert

. . . education for social justice begins with our own existential situation in the world. We do not leap from our typically self-indulgent lives into action for others by pedagogical tricks. We do not move from the most often comfortable lives of our mostly suburban people to scenes of rural or urban poverty by fiat. An initial principle . . . is to establish linkage between our lives the problems of the world. It is hard to experience the prosperous middle-classness of most of our congregations and then be catapulted into the world of poverty and oppression that surrounds us locally, nationally and internationally.

Unitarian Universalists . . . have benefited immensely from the status quo in American culture. We are at or near the top of the economic pyramid. The late Saul Alinsky once wrote “The trouble with my liberal friends -- and I have lots of them -- is that their moral indignation and sense of commitment vary inversely with their distance from the scene of the conflict. Once you’re on top you want to stay there. You learn to eat in very good restaurants, to fly first class. The next thing you know these things are essential to you. You’re imprisoned by them.”

A Union Theological School student challenges us with this terse remark: “the liberal in me wants a different world, but the liberal in me also wants the world without challenging myself, without any pain.”

***The Pyramid of Privilege*
Sermon**

I have always thought of myself as a pretty normal person. I had what seemed like a pretty normal childhood, growing up in the 1950’s and 60’s. We lived in the suburbs of New York City. My mother was a full-time homemaker, and my father got on a train each morning and headed off to work in Manhattan. We always had a least one car, later two. My parents were married to each other, and I had a younger brother with whom I had the standard level of sibling rivalry. There was always enough food to eat, a warm house, a bed to sleep in. I lived in a safe neighborhood where I could get on my bike and explore. When I was sick, I got the health care I needed. The lives of our neighbors were similar to mine. Just the normal attributes of life in mid-20th century America.

So what is normal, anyhow? Is it my comfortable middle-class American lifestyle?

Is it the young mother cradling her toddler, killed in a drive-by shooting in a St. Louis neighborhood, or the family of a teen killed in gang violence in East Buffalo?

The Denver parent who works two full-time jobs at minimum wage, and still cannot afford to care for his three young children?

The lesbian couple in Oklahoma who cannot legalize their commitment as life partners because their state has defined marriage in a way that excludes them?

The American-born businessman who gets harassed by people on the street, just because he is of Middle Eastern descent?

How do I get to think of myself as normal, when my own experience is so different from that of many others?

I will admit, when I first began to think seriously about the idea of privilege, and how it affects me, I was a bit confused. I could understand the concept all right – the idea that some people in society have better access to resources, more assured rights than others, simply because of the color of their skin, their family ties, their place in society. But the feeling inside me did not match that information. I took my life, its comforts and resources, for granted. And I certainly did not feel I was living on the top of the world – it is easy to find people who have more stuff, live in nicer homes, travel first class and generally

live better than I do – in the news, in movies and TV shows, examples of the rich and famous are all around us.

Rev. Dick Gilbert in today's reading describes it as a "pyramid" – a social and economic pyramid of privilege, with many more people on the bottom than at the top. So if I am closer to the top than to the bottom, which I certainly am, why do I not feel particularly privileged? The top of a pyramid is not a normal place, either statistically or geographically. Why did I persist in thinking of myself as "normal," or at least a normal American, even in the face of all the evidence to the contrary?

And there is a lot of evidence to the contrary. We see persistent signs everywhere around us that institutional racism, discrimination and cultural barriers are alive and well in our nation and in our world. There are consistent patterns of inequality between Americans of northern European descent and people of other groups identified as racially or ethnically "other," including those of African, Latin American and Native American heritage. Advantages are still held by men, by heterosexuals, by younger people. According to Department of Justice figures, one in three African American males born today will serve time in jail. Average earnings for women still trail those of men by over 25%. Transgendered individuals in America face unemployment rates of up to 80% -- one example is Susan Stanton, a well respected city manager in Florida, who faced a long and frustrating search for a job several years ago after her gender reassignment process. Gay and lesbian couples are still denied basic human and legal rights in family formation in many states. Racial and ethnic profiling are still prevalent practices among law enforcement officials. And then there are the hate crimes, and bullying in schools, which we still hear about far too often.

Even though any one of us may not be explicitly oppressing or discriminating against anyone else, these patterns of inequality do not need our intentions or actions to hold them in place. They are deeply rooted in social, economic, educational and cultural systems that take generations to change, so although we may be on the road to a more equitable world, it is a long and uneven journey. And the first step toward changing a social and cultural system depends on understanding it, including its subtle dynamics, and out of that understanding making a commitment to change.

One way of defining "privilege" is that it is a social advantage that a person does not earn, does not do anything to merit, but is simply born with – one of my colleagues describes it "as though I wake up every morning and someone has put ten dollars in my pocket – so I start the day ten dollars ahead of anyone else who does not have my position of social privilege."

For a long time I struggled with the question – if I have that extra ten dollars in my pocket every day, if I enjoy all sorts of advantages that others do not, why don't I feel particularly privileged? I just feel normal. And then it was like a light coming on in my brain. *Normal.*

That is a key indicator of being in a position of privilege – that the good life feels normal, and that the advantages are taken for granted. It sort of defines anyone who is not in a position of privilege as "abnormal" in their lives of struggle, discrimination, and failure. We have all seen the tendency to blame the victim, to hold people responsible for their own struggle or failure even when the deck is stacked against them. That is a natural result of privilege feeling normal to those who have it.

But then I have to ask, for people of good will, and most of us are people of good will, what holds that sense of normalcy in place? Even when we know there is privilege, and that we may enjoy unearned advantages in our lives, why do we still have that feeling of just being average, normal? I have heard that even people who earn a million dollars a year sometimes define themselves as "middle class" – and we know that is certainly not the real middle of the income range -- a sense of being normal seems to come to us naturally, as if wherever we are on the pyramid is the normal place.

I have come to think of the position of privilege that a person may inhabit, this lofty perch near the top of the social, cultural, and economic pyramid, as being surrounded by an invisible system of mirrors. Those mirrors are above, below, and on all sides, and their function is to reflect a person's own reality back to them as the only reality in the world. When she looks out, she finds herself reflected back to her, no matter which direction she looks – her opportunities, her security, her environment – her perfectly normal reality. Others who are in different places on the pyramid are all on the other sides of those mirrors. That creates a distortion in perception, that keeps a person insulated in their own world-views. The mirrors make it difficult, if not impossible, for me to see and understand the reality of others. The “mirrors” create the illusion of normalcy.

As long as I don't realize that those mirrors are there, and how they shape my perceptions, I cannot clearly see the experience or the reality of anyone else. As I look through the reflection of my own reality, others seem so different that I may fail to appreciate our common humanity, our common needs and rights. I inadvertently participate in their oppression because I am simply blind to it most of the time. That attitude is what both Dr. King and Rev. Gilbert described in the readings earlier. We may be comfortable in our own normality, our own privileged status, and the mirrors of privilege keep us from fully seeing the reality of others. Until we learn to see a larger reality, we cannot know how our advantage affects us, and how others are constrained in their possibility to realize their full human potential.

These “mirrors” are no accident, but are strongly rooted in our history, and in the desire of the people at the top of the pyramid to maintain privilege. The mirrors are perpetuated, often invisibly, by the culture in which we are embedded. Fundamentally, racism, heterosexism and other systems of oppression are all about power and privilege. As a UUA publication describes it, “all oppressions – sexism, racism, heterosexism, classism, ableism, and ageism – are locked by the common coordinates of power and privilege and by the common methods of limiting, controlling and destroying lives.”

The history of our nation, founded as it is on the principles of justice and equal rights for all, is riddled with contradictions. The founders of this nation came to these shores seeking freedom to live their lives and practice their religion as they wished. But they were not defenders of freedom for anyone else. They turned around and proceeded to create, and even to fight to the death to defend, systems of oppression over others. Indentured servitude and enslavement were protected under the law in this land of freedom. European settlers systematically drove out the first peoples who were settled on this land, if they did not kill them outright. All in the name of power and privilege, defining anyone different from themselves as inferior, to justify the oppression.

We may each have ancestors who were perpetrators, or victims, or both, in these systems of oppression in the early years of this continent – the more we do genetic testing, the more we realize that we may not really know where all our ancestors came from, and that we all share in a very complex heritage. My own Irish ancestors suffered bitter oppression, both in their own land and when they arrived on these shores. And whatever our lineage, I believe we are all victimized by any oppression, because it diminishes us in our common humanity, no matter where we sit in the pyramid.

Systems of oppression – racism, sexism, heterosexism – become cultural norms, passed onto each new generation by parents, schools, literature, the media – and they serve as invisible bonds that hold the system of power and privilege, and the mirrors, securely in place. This is a learned attitude – if you have ever watched a small child interact with diverse playmates, you can see that it does not seem to be part of human nature to assume that someone is inferior or dangerous, just because they are different. We must learn and be taught our place in the system of privilege, in ways we don't even realize at the time.

Unitarian Universalist theologian Thandeka calls this “learning to be white,” those early experiences that teach us where we stand in the pyramid. Many times we have even forgotten that we were taught, but the teaching stays within us. I now understand that some of that teaching happened in my own life, before I even remember it. But there is one incident I do remember.

When I was 17, my parents were selling the home in which I had grown up, and I noticed there was no “for sale” sign in the front yard. When I asked them why, they said, “because a black family might buy it, and our neighbors would never forgive us for that. So we are selling it through word of mouth, through people we know – going through people like us, selling to people like us.” I was shocked, and of course powerless at that age to do anything about it. This event, so out of character with the things my parents and my church taught me were right, reminds me how those patterns are maintained in subtle ways, reinforced in my own family of origin, in my own life. My parents did not even acknowledge that there was any racism in their own motivation, but blamed it on trying to keep our neighbors happy.

The differences distorted by our mirrors are not restricted to race and ethnicity. They extend to gender, age, sexual identity, physical or mental ability, and other defining human characteristics. Rita Brock, in the book Proverbs of Ashes, describes her discovery of her own distorted assumptions about others: “I was no homophobic, but I was heterosexist. I fell easily into assumptions that someone was heterosexual unless they made a point of coming out to me. I was oblivious to heterosexual privilege, the ease of fitting in, of having my relationships be open and public, of having my sexual identity an unquestioned norm that required no examination. Seeing that privilege helped me understand the difficulty white men had perceiving and acknowledging their privilege.”

The problems of injustice and privilege are theological issues, as well as social and political issues. If we truly believe that we are one humanity, created or evolved, and if we commit ourselves with integrity to the principles of the inherent worth and dignity of every person, to justice, equity and compassion in human relations, then as part of that commitment we must turn our attention to addressing the inequities in our systems of power and privilege. Rita Brock goes on to say “Racism, sexism, . . . homophobia are abuses of power that are devastating to love. They prevent us from being fully present and alive. They diminish the presence of spirit by wrapping oppressor and oppressed, perpetrator and victim, together in emotional chains that force the air out of the spaces between them.”

But how is all this about me, or about any of us? I am just living my life as best I know how, I’m not oppressing anybody – and what can I do after all? How is all this my problem?

There is a teaching story about a skilled carpenter who decided to retire from his job. His boss prevailed upon him to build just one more house, and the carpenter reluctantly agreed. But his heart was not in it – he used sub-standard materials, did not do his best work, and cut corners just to get it done. When the house was completed, his boss handed him the keys to the front door, saying, “As my retirement gift to you, I am giving you this last house you built.” And of course, the carpenter wished he had built the house with more care, with all the skill at his command.

That is the story of our world – we get to live in the world we build, with our skills and with our caring attention – or we reap the consequences of our lack of attention to this house we are building. Do we want to live in a world, in a nation, where people are denied access to rights and resources because the people at the top want to maintain their power – perhaps *our* power – and live in fear of losing their privilege? Where keeping people down, or hurting them, is justified by the color of their skin, the shape of their face, who they love, who they are?

If we care about justice for all, if we want to move beyond a damaging tribalism that diminishes the presence of spirit in human life, what can we do? I think a first step is to become aware of the mirrors

in our lives – to acknowledge that our perceptions of the world around us may be distorted by those reflective surfaces that surround us, keeping us oblivious to the humanity of others. We can begin to recognize that we may not be perceiving others clearly, because very early in life we developed an unconscious system of judgment that placed subtle barriers between ourselves and anyone not like us. I am not talking about active prejudice, for we may be loving and tolerant, and still have in place an invisible barrier that reflects and distorts our perception of reality, mirrors that immobilize us within an oppressive system.

Understanding across difference begins with awareness of ourselves, and of the ways we are encountering and understanding others. Only when we begin to engage with the notion that our view of the world is shaped by our normative expectations, can we begin to become aware of the mirrors, aware of that unconscious system of judgment, and to begin to scratch off that reflective surface. We have years of practice in being blinded by our cultural and social norms, so it will not happen all at once, but it is vital that we begin.

Then, one scratch at a time, with love and patience for ourselves and others, we start to remove the silver backing from our own mirrors, reducing the distortion, improving the clarity of our perceptions. We do this by noticing our responses, our assumptions, our judgments, and by asking, again and again, “Am I reacting out of tribalism, or out of clear understanding and an intention toward justice? Am I seeing the person before me in their true humanity, even if she or he has a different skin tone, a different shape of eye and facial bones, a different gender or age or sexual identity than I do? Am I clearly hearing what he is saying? Am I interpreting her actions accurately?”

It will not happen all at once, but if we can begin to move toward clearer perceiving and understanding, then I believe that we can then take the next steps to dissolve the barriers, to connect across our differences, to grasp hands to move toward a world of greater justice and harmony.

When I think about my life, and what I know about the world, I realize that I live in a state of amazing grace – with gifts I have not sought nor earned, that support my life and help me to be as fully human as I can be. It is also a gift of grace to be able to see more clearly that we live in a world that has both justice and injustice, both hope and despair, both rich resources and deep need.

And there is a grace in our lives right here and now – the grace of our sustaining, challenging faith community, calling us forth to work for greater justice and love in the world, so that all may share in human rights and resources, so that all may experience their full humanity in this amazing world. So may it be, and Amen.

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